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Lake threat calls for desperate measures

The carp are coming. It is looking less likely by the day that they will be stopped. But the Army Corps of Engineers and state and federal environmental officials must make every effort. If Asian carp are allowed into the Great Lakes, they will cause an ecological disaster.

As we noted last month, it was troubling that experts were investing so much faith in an electrified barrier that had been installed in the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. Its purpose was to prevent the invasive species from covering the last dozen miles or so to Lake Michigan.

The giant fish – imported to Arkansas from China 15 years ago – already had traversed much of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, eating their way relentlessly toward Lake Michigan.

The only waterway that connects the Mississippi and Great Lakes watersheds is the canal. To many experts, it long has been clear that the manmade tie to the Mississippi must be permanently severed, rather than betting on a single mechanical device to stop the fish.

Cutting off the Mississippi would be a costly undertaking. But, should the carp (there are four species of them, one weighing up to 100 pounds and measuring four feet in length) find their way to Lake Michigan, native species would be threatened with devastation. So would the \$4.5 billion sport fishing industry the Great Lakes support. And every river and lake connected to the Great Lakes would be in danger.

It was unnerving to learn in mid-November that officials were resorting to poisoning a stretch of the canal next month with a fish-killing chemical so they could shut down the electrical barrier for maintenance. It seemed like an extreme and risky move.

That news has been followed by worse news yet: The carp apparently have leaped over the electrical barrier. DNA tests of surface material on its lakeside placed two species of the voracious and prolific fish within seven miles of Lake Michigan. They're one lock and one dam away from Great Lakes access.

DNR officials now are urgently trying to find the fish. They're contemplating further waterway poisonings, netting and electrofishing (where all fish are stunned and native species are collected and relocated).

These are desperate measures indeed. Obviously DNR officials must do all in their power to fend off the carp. But it is difficult to believe that whatever steps are taken will be sufficient. It is more important that ever that the Corps of Engineers proceed with its much-delayed plan to separate the vast Great Lakes and Mississippi basins.

The project should have been undertaken years ago, when the threat was recognized. Since then, the Asian carp have seriously damaged the Mississippi River. In some areas, they account for 95 percent of the fish population. As one official with the Alliance for the Great Lakes noted, if nothing is done the lakes will become "giant carp pools."

State and federal protectors of our natural resources must realize that inadequate electrical barriers and periodic fish poisonings will not keep the carp out. And the carp must not be allowed in. Permanent separation of the watersheds is the answer.

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